

Partnerships Make the Difference at Harpeth River State Park

By Jane Polansky

Who would have thought that a chain of recreational, archeological and historic sites along the Harpeth River in Cheatham and Davidson counties would have ever evolved into a popular state park visited by nearly 80,000 people annually? Vision, planning, and resources are the keys to Harpeth River State Park's transformation.

In 1994 efforts began to consolidate eight small satellite parks along the Harpeth River in Cheatham and Davidson counties into one stand-alone park. On July 1, 2005, the process was complete. These areas were once managed and maintained by a single ranger who lived on-site and who was responsible for park maintenance, programming, resource management and park security. This bundle of responsibility was managed under the supervision of the park manager at Montgomery Bell State Park.



Eagle Scout Patrick Breedlove and others from BSA Troop 952 constructed this bridge at Newsom's Mill Historic Site.
Photo by Jane Polansky.

By now, you're probably wondering how one person could possibly manage and maintain so many areas and responsibilities. During the transition period, a full assessment of the satellite park operation was conducted. This included daily operations, available resources and site inspections. Overall, the operation was running smoothly. The development was limited, but the opportunities for improvement were wide open.

With a vision in mind, determination and a lot of resourcefulness, the Harpeth River State Park flourished and today exemplifies qualities of a well-managed and maintained state park.

Some of the park's major accomplishments in the last four years include: creating a name for the park while allowing each of the individual sites to maintain their identity; acquiring additional land to expand and enhance the park; improving park signage along roadways and within the park; improving access areas along the river; increasing the number of park programs offered; and establishing adequate park funding, equipment and staff.

A little "thinking outside the box," and things began falling in place as the park began exhibiting a new look and image. Some creative budgeting and grants totaling approximately \$6,500 from the Tennessee Parks and Greenways Foundation, the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association and the Harpeth River Watershed Association have provided interpretive panels designed to help park visitors learn the history associated with the park and have improved canoe access areas at several sites.

Additionally, the IRIS license plate program funds, exceeding \$24,000, have been used for removal of exotic invasive plant species, planting trees in riparian areas and along hiking trails, and for wildflower restoration projects.

The state lands acquisition committee approved state funding totaling approximately \$20,000 for the purchase of a new river access area. Access fee money exceeding \$25,000, was used to purchase first aid and rescue equipment; canoes and caving equipment; a new canoe launch ramp at Kingston Springs City Park; new signage at all site locations; and gravel parking lots at Hidden Lake and the Gossett Tract.

Today, donation boxes have replaced the access fee tubes and the money collected will be used for interpretive panels, land acquisition, and other park improvements.

Other resources stem from volunteers. One man donated his time and talent to create a bluebird trail at Hidden Lake. Now he monitors and maintains the nesting boxes. Another family visiting from Virginia cleared exotic and invasive plants from Hidden Lake. Two Boy Scouts of America Scout Masters, Mike Breedlove and Bob Smodic, have helped 12 young men achieve the rank of Eagle Scout through projects designed to enhance hiking trails and reduce vandalism inside the park.

Several scout troops, university organizations, and leadership development programs, along with interested local volunteers have participated in river clean up events, planted trees along trails, cleared strainers from

the river, and assisted park staff with general park maintenance projects. Other interpretive park programs have nearly doubled with the addition of an interpretive specialist ranger, a seasonal laborer, and numerous program volunteers.

Still another source of resources includes partnerships with government and non-governmental agencies including TDOT, city and county agencies, businesses, property owners, and local media venues. Through TDOT, park roads, signage and roadsides have been improved and maintained. City firefighters have assisted with river rescues and the installation of mile markers along the river. County officials have assisted in efforts to create a buffer zone along sections of the river. Commercial outfitters work alongside park staff to provide quality experiences for river enthusiasts. Adjacent park property owners are willing to provide easements, and even deed or sell land to the state for park expansion. The local media promotes park activities through publications and television.

Through the support and relationships developed and maintained with these and other resources, the Harpeth River State Park will continue to grow and provide visitors with the safest, most enjoyable quality recreational experience possible. By working together and utilizing current and new resources we can continue to improve visitor experiences at the Harpeth River State Park.

If you and your organization would like to be a part of making a difference or if you know of others who are willing to assist with park programs or projects, we'd like to hear from you. Call the Harpeth River State Park at 615-952-2099 or write to Harpeth River State Park 1640 Cedar Hill Road, Kingston Springs, TN 37082.

For additional park information, directions, and programs visit the Web site www.tnstateparks.com.

(Jane Polansky is the manager of the Harpeth River State Park. She has worked at four other state parks in Tennessee and with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. She obtained a B.S. degree and an M.A.T. degree from Winthrop College in South Carolina.)